

Occasional Paper No. 64

THE AHOM POLITICAL SYSTEM : AN ENQUIRY  
INTO THE STATE FORMATION PROCESS IN  
MEDIEVAL ASSAM : 1228-1714

AMALENDU GUHA

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Occasional Paper No.64

The Ahom Political System : An Enquiry  
into the State Formation Process in  
Medieval Assam : 1228-1714

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THE AHOM POLITICAL SYSTEM : AN ENQUIRY INTO  
THE STATE FORMATION PROCESS IN MEDIEVAL  
ASSAM : 1228-1714\*

I

Conceptual Frame and Methodology

The process of the formation of tribal politics in northeast India was varied in point of time and space. The kingdoms of Assam, Jaintia, Cachar, Tripura and Manipur, formed during the medieval times as sovereign states, survived till the early 19th century. All these Kingdoms provide us with opportunities to study the problem of state formation in depth. To any study of the transition from tribalism to statehood, both history and social anthropology could contribute; the former by examining extant records and recorded oral tradition and the latter, by scrutinising the fossilized traces of the process that are still extant within the relevant tribal social structures. A coordinated depth-study of select cases, as the one presented in this paper, is sure to yield new information for further clarification or modification of the current theories of state formation.

The first and most ancient of plans of government, according to Morgan, is "a social organization founded upon gentes, phratries and tribes"; the second and latest in time, "a political organization founded upon territory and upon property".<sup>1</sup> Why and how, and at what point of time, did the custom-enforced tribal social organization give way to a coercive authority that was separated from and placed above the totality? This is precisely the question to be answered by each

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\* An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a workshop organized by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, on "Tribal Politics and State Systems in Eastern and North-Eastern India" in July 1981.



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micro-study. For, we find in observed cases a considerable time lag between the first appearance of property and the emergence of the special type of organization that could be called a state. The other question is as to how, once brought into existence, this authority gradually matured into full statehood in each specific case. To meet these questions, it is necessary to look for the dissolvents of the classical segmentary-type primitive societies of the pre-state situation (the 'gentile' constitution of Morgan and Engels). It is also necessary to identify the retarding or accelerating factors, if any, in the corresponding ecology and economy of these societies.

No tribe leaped to statehood while it was still at its pristine stage. Before that it needed a sedentary agricultural population, with a degree of division of labour and social stratification, as the starting point. Statehood emerged only when community was itself capable of yielding a surplus sufficient for the maintenance of a non-producing public authority, or of systematically appropriating such a surplus in the form of tribute from a neighbouring community. Smaller the surplus, less elaborate was its public authority structure. In the northeast Indian context, tribal state formations, early or medieval, were all expected to be based on either their own or others' surplus-yielding wet rice cultivations, rain-fed or irrigated. Such wet rice cultivation was possible with or without the use of cattle-powered ploughs. However, in India it was mostly the plough that ensured a relatively large surplus and, therefore, also a higher form of political organization. Larger the surplus, more developed was the state.

But why should a surplus-producing community, at some point of time, be necessarily transformed into or adapted to statehood unless there had also been other compelling circumstances? In fact, this transformation took place when the leading families, who had the



customary monopoly of supplying important public functionaries, began to realize that their public capacities could also be utilized to promote their own specific economic interests. In other words, a process of state formation started when they began to realize that they formed an interest-group - a class in making.

At the borderline of statehood, two forms of property coexisted side by side - communal property in some form or other and private property. These conditions created the objective basis for an urge for statehood with a view to reconciling the nascent class antagonisms while still maintaining the public functions for general benefits. At this juncture, the noble and relatively wealthy families emerged as a special privileged aristocracy, a distinct ruling stratum from the rest of the tribe. It became a sort of a 'class' though still at its rudimentary stage, and the authority structure it represented was the inchoate state. The actual process of a tribe's breaking-up into classes and formation of a state reached its terminal point in more than one way, depending on the circumstances in each case.

The period from the 13th to the 16th century saw the emergence and development of a large number of tribal political formations in northeast India. The Chutiya, the Tai-Ahom, the Koch, the Dimasa (Kachari), the Tripuri, the Meithei (Manipuri), the Khasi (Khyriem) and the Bnar (Jaintia) - all these tribes crystallized into rudimentary state formations by the 15th century. In each case, the process involved a transformation of some organs of the erstwhile tribal organization, a replacement of the rest by new organs and a usurpation thereby of the public power by a privileged class in making. At this stage, generally, a written language (in most cases not the tribe's own) was also adopted for purposes of the Court. The most developed



of the tribes in the 15th century were the Chutiyas. Their Kingdom was annexed and absorbed by the Tai-Ahoms by 1523. The remaining tribes however went on elaborating and sophisticating their respective state formations until their subjugation by the British. With these processes were associated the spread of wet rice cultivation, the adoption of the plough, the subjugation<sup>by them</sup> of neighbouring peoples, the migration of scribes and artisans from a relatively advanced area, a greater or lesser degree of Hinduization of the ruling families and the growth of petty commodity production to a limited extent. Historians, social anthropologists and archeologists of this region are yet to work together to explore the specifics of each of these processes.

In this paper, our objective is to examine specifically how the Tai-Ahoms - a segment of the Mao-Shan sub-tribe of the Tais of southeast Asia - organized themselves politically in course of their settling down in Upper Assam after 1228 A.D. Our acquaintance with Assamese chronicles, many of which are now available in well-edited, published form and some even in English translation, is one reason why we take up the Ahoms for a case study.<sup>2</sup> The other reason is that the problem was partly dealt with in some of our earlier studies which could be referred to for details.<sup>3</sup> We propose to show here how the feudal-type Ahom political system, rooted in patriarchal property rights, emerged from an earlier social base of hierarchically balanced lineage groups and then attained its full-fledged statehood in due course. In doing so, we shall first take note of two eye-witness accounts of the system - one relating to 1662-63 and another to the 1790s. We shall then proceed to analyse how the preceding developments had taken place.<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper the terms, 'Tai-Ahom' and 'Ahom', are henceforth used interchangeably. We have used the comparative method, as and when felt necessary, to bring out certain wider dimensions of the problem.



II

The System as Viewed by Eye-Witnesses.

When the Mughal general Mir Jumlah occupied Garhgaon the Ahom capital in March 1662 he was able to seize there, among other things, nearly three lakhs of rupees' worth of gold and silver, 82 elephants and 170 large store-houses, each containing from one to ten thousand maunds of rice. The inhabitants were found to be in the habit of storing in their houses one year's supply of food of all kinds, since there was no practice of grain trading in the kingdom. We are also told that no eatables, only betel-leaves (and nuts), were available in the daily bazar of Garhgaon. The city of Garhgaon, with its mud-walled citadel at the centre, appeared to the invaders as a mere aggregation of irregularly laid-out villages and tillage. These together formed a wide circular campus with a radius of about three Koses (one Kos =  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles). There was also a continuous green belt of two Kos-deep bamboo plantation forming its outer ring along the circumference. Shihabuddin Talish, a chronicler who accompanied the Assam campaign, left on record many such details of the Ahom ways of life, of which only some are mentioned here. According to him, commoners, noblemen and the king - they all lived in thatched pile-houses, made of wood and bamboo. However, the pile-houses in which the nobles and the king resided were impressive mansions, being carved, decorated and more spacious. When dead, they were each accompanied by a few of their slaves and women in their graves. In an attempt to estimate the Kingdom's resources, Talish wrote :

"The currency consists of cowries and rupees and gold coins with the stamp of the Raja. Copper coins are not current ... If this country were administered like the Imperial dominions, it is



very likely that forty to forty-five lakhs of rupees would be collected from the revenue paid by the raiyats, the price of elephants caught in the jungles and other sources.

It is not the custom here to take any land tax from the cultivators; but in every house one man out of three has to render service to the Raja, and if there is any delay in doing what he orders, no other punishment than death is inflicted. Hence, the most complete obedience is rendered by the people to the biddings of their Raja.

Six or seven thousand Assamese always stand guard round the abode and bedroom of the Raja, and these are called Chaudangs. They are the devoted and trusted servants of the Raja and are his executioners. The weapons of war are matchlocks, cannon, arrows with and without iron heads, short swords, spears and long (bows) and crossbows. In time of war all the inhabitants of the kingdom have to go to battle, whether they wish it or not;...

Falish gave details relating to the formal autocratic powers of the monarch, but did not take note of the curbs on those powers, as exercised in theory and practice by the nobility and the people. However, the Persian, Assamese and Tai chronicles apart, we have also on record the notes of John Peter Wade (1800) and Francis Hamilton Buchanan (1808-9) on the Ahom political system to fill in the lacunae.<sup>6</sup>

A scholar and medical officer, Wade had accompanied Captain Welsh's Expedition to Assam in 1792-94 and paid one more visit thereto in 1798. He had then seen the Ahom political system functioning in its worst days. He found "the civil constitution of the kingdom partly Monarchical partly Aristocratical exhibiting a system highly artificial, regular and novel, however defective in other respects". The military arrangement was, according to him, "founded on feudal tenure with



respect to the Tributary Princes, but on a militia within the limits of the Kingdom". Wade translated two local chronicles (buranji) from Assamese into English with the help of local pundits. He also compiled a near-exhaustive list of the state functionaries with relevant information on their titles, ranks and functions. He observed in his introductory note, dated 1800, that next in rank to the "five Patreh-Muntreas (Patra-Mantrii ministers and councillors - AG) of the Kingdom or Supreme Council of the State" were the Fokuns - military and civil, and then a whole gradation of officers down the chain of the hierarchy. "In a more extensive application" the Patra-Mantrii included, according to him, "all the Military Fokuns and even the Rajkoas; all the officers of the state in reality who claimed a right to be consulted". In Assamese chronicles, such an extended session is referred to as a Bar-Mel (grand assembly). Wade's perceptive characterization of the system needs no major revision, and it may be rewarding to quote him at length to show how the office-holders were remunerated :

"The emoluments of class of officers must have been very great, but their acknowledged perquisites are not very considerable. The Monarchs confer lands on each on the terms which first characterized the first period of the feudal law. The quantity of land depends on the pleasure of the Monarch. As their residence is established in the vicinity of the capital at a distance from their personal estates to which they can only pay an occasional visit, they receive an allotment of land fit for the cultivation of rice, a garden and a house (Baree) in that neighbourhood. On the demise of a Fokun, these revert to the Monarch, who bestoweth latter on the Fokun's successor. Each Fokun is allowed in common with every other military officer the proportion of two men in twenty under his command for his own use, as the Hazarikias, Khoikias and Barras have



each a similar proportion, the number of men, who remain for the public service is greatly reduced".

The military cum civil officers - they had control also over the administration of justice in respect of the men under them - formed a chain of command from the top downwards. A Phukan was in command of a division (Khel) of 6,000, a Naikri (chilidarchi) of a thousand, a Saikia (centurion) of a hundred and a Bora (headman) of twenty militiamen. The actual strength of the units, however, might fall short of the norms. A Rajkhowa was ordinarily a governor of a territory and head of the levies from his jurisdiction. There were also other officers - the Baruas for instance - with mainly civil functions.<sup>7</sup>

The hierarchy of the militia throughout the 17th-18th centuries had at its base the other ranks, i.e. the paiks, consisting of all adult males in the 16-50 age-group, excepting for the members of the nobility, privileged persons of high castes, slaves and the serfs attached to the soil. They were all registered for state service as paiks, and four (sometimes three) paiks constituted a unit called got. One member of each such got "was obliged to be present, in rotation" as Sir Edward Gait puts it -

"for such work as might be required of him, and during his absence from home the other members were expected to cultivate his land and keep his family supplied with food. In time of peace it was the custom to employ the paiks on public works; and this is how the enormous tanks and the high embanked roads of Upper Assam came into existence".<sup>8</sup>



In times of an extreme emergency, the second and even the third member of the got could be called up simultaneously, even at the risk of disrupting agriculture. The main sources of revenue were the commutation money realized from men exempted from personal service, rent paid by paiks for their cultivated lands in excess of the tax-free allotment and the miscellaneous duties. The tax-free allotment per paik was nearly 2.66 acres of wet rice lands in Upper Assam. It was a little higher in Kamrup which was annexed by the Ahoms in the 17th century. When a paik died or went out of service, his land was allotted to another - generally to a member of his own extended family, newly registered as a paik on his attaining the qualifying age.

The political system, as comprehended by Wade and later by Buchanan and others, had attained its final shape not before the early 17th century. In this final form the system, despite its strong semi-tribal features, so closely resembled western feudalism in some aspects that S.K. Bhuyan, too, like Wade, characterized it as feudal. He wrote :

"Since their conquest of Assam in the beginning of the thirteenth century they had held to the bulk of the people the same relation as the Normans did for generations in England. They were the feudatory lords in the country, and all appointments as far as practicable, were retained amongst them, the highest situations being hereditary in the descendants of these chiefs who were leaders in the invasion and conquest of Assam".<sup>9</sup>

After their entry into Upper Assam, the migrant Tai-Ahoms continued to carry on and extend wet rice cultivation by reclaiming marshy and forest lands. Their peasant polity (mung), still at its rudimentary stage, was based on a tiny territory throughout the entire period from 1228 to 1497. It had underwent Brahmanical influence only



marginally till then. The years, 1497-1539, saw a continuous territorial expansion, an increase in the size of the Patra-Mantrii from two to three, a degree of sophistication in the state machinery and a further growth of Brahmanical influence. Again during the period from 1603 to 1648, the militia system was thoroughly reformed with a view to confronting the Mughal invasion. The State became more centralized in that process. Two new offices - those of the Barphukan and the Barbarua\* - were created, thus raising the number of Patra-Mantrii to five. Following the final expulsion of the Mughals from Lower Assam by 1681, the Ahom State underwent territorial consolidation and a rapid process of further Hinduization under conditions of prolonged peace. After 1770 started its period of decline - civil wars and depopulation followed by foreign occupations - culminating in the final eclipse of 1826 by way of the British annexation.

Incidentally, the literate Ahoms retained the Tai language and script well until the end of the 17th century. In that century of Ahom-Mughal conflicts, this language first coexisted with and then was progressively replaced by Assamese (Asamiyā) at and outside the Court. After a phase of bilingualism, it finally died a natural death in Assam. Now only a few Ahom priests there retain the knowledge of the Tai language. Yet another fact to note is that all Ahoms, irrespective of their royal or ordinary descent, remained free of any kind of Rajputization process. In Hindu society, they were all despised for their beef-eating food habits. Later when they shunned such habits, they were accepted as a low-ranking Hindu peasant caste of intermediate status. Now-a-days, they are listed as a Backward Community. The Ahoms were never numerically dominant in the State they built and, at the time of 1872 and 1881 Censuses, they formed hardly one-tenth of the populations relevant to the erstwhile Ahom territory (i.e., by and

\* The Barphukan was in charge of the territories wrested from the Koches and the Mughals, posted as the viceroy in that region. The Barbarua functioned at the capital as the chief secretary to the royal government.



large, the Brahmaputra Valley without the Goalpara district). Even in those years, they were found mostly concentrated as before in the present district of Sibsagar, and to a lesser extent <sup>also</sup> in Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur.

### III

#### Some Southeast Asian Roots of the Heritage

In the 13th century, the Indo-Aryan culture still dominated the lives of a major section of the population in the central plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. However, nothing was left of the ancient State of Kamarupa at that juncture, except for what fragments remained of it in the form of petty chiefdoms. The petty chiefs were called bhuyans, many of whom were migrant adventurers from north India. The rule by a bhuyan was called bhuyan-raj and their temporary confederacies were known as bara-bhuyan raj. During the 13th-16th centuries, while these continued to represent the rule over older peasant settlements, there emerged alongside of them also new Kingdoms from several tribal bases, then undergoing a process of politico-economic transformation. These Kingdoms did not represent mere dynastic changes in a going political society. Rather, they were almost new state formations in a seemingly political vacuum. The Chutiya, Ahom, Dimasa, Jaintia and Koch States were such formations. In all these cases, a developing tribe provided the chief and other elements of organization, from which the relevant formation emerged.

In the matter of contributing towards a general theory of state formation, our case study has two major limitations. Though they still retained many of their gentile ties, the 13th-century Tai-Ahoms had the capacity of surplus production. They had long left their pre-literate stage behind. They had even prior taste of some kind of a



political society (mung) already before they quit Mogaung for Upper Assam. Mogaung, known as Nara to the Assamese and Pong to the Manipuris, was then an important Tai (Shan) principality of the Upper Burma and Yunnan region. That the Ahom migrants did not come to a politically void region sets the other limitation. The political heritage of ancient Kamarupa had not left Upper Assam totally untouched. After its eclipse, though the southeastern part of Upper Assam had lapsed into retarded conditions, the fragmented political structures incorporating that tradition, still loomed large in the form of petty chiefdoms (bin̄yan-rāj) in the vicinity. It was under such circumstances that the Ahoms started building a state system of their own in the easternmost extremity of the Brahmaputra Valley. They had therefore some building blocks even there to pick up and start with. Later, as they expanded westward, they became increasingly exposed to this heritage and to the contemporary Turko-Afghan and subsequent Mughal influence.

A brief reference to the Tai-Ahom heritage may not be out of place here. The distinct identity of the Tai people was first noticed in Yunnan. At the beginning of the Christian era, they were described in Chinese annals as living in hot richly-watered plains, growing wet rice through irrigation and terracing. It was noted that they used water buffaloes and oxen for ploughing and lived in pile-houses with verandahs. Later, these Tais spread out to many parts of southeast Asia, carrying with them all these cultural traits, alongwith their Tai language and their patriarchal social organization dominated by clan chiefs. In turn, they were also exposed in that process to whatever Indian influences in respect of script, mythology etc. had meanwhile reached that region. The carriers of Tai culture to Assam were no exception to this exposure except for their non-conversion to Buddhism. That is why the Tai-Ahoms of Assam and their Shan neighbours of



Upper Burma shared their language, script and legends of origin in common with only minor variations.<sup>10</sup>

At what stage of political development were the Ahoms when they entered Assam in 1228 and how did they come to form a full-pledged state? For an answer, we must look into the earliest period (1228-1407) of the chronicled Ahom history and also into legends and myths as recorded in the same chronicles. Myths are admittedly not so much concerned with a succession of events as with the moral significance of situations and are, more often than not allegorical or symbolical in form. The story in a myth may be false, yet in essence historical in character.<sup>11</sup> We shall therefore make an attempt below to explore what was historical in the Ahom myths and legends. A chronicler viewed the stateless stage of society as a golden age (satya-yuga) when

"Love was the order of the time. Man used to take food in the same dish like sons of the same mother; and nobody entertained any jealousy or hatred towards any person",<sup>12</sup>

But this golden age came to an end - this is implied in the chronicler's arguments - with the accumulation of family wealth and consequent social contradictions. In his own language, "because of conflicting interests later in the treta-yuga, the strong pressed hard against the weak". It was then that the two founding fathers of the first Tai Kingdom were sent down from Heaven to the earth. Under their dynastic rule, in the reign of a descendant of theirs in antiquity, -

"the sufferings of the people came to an end, and they became happy as before. ... There was no taxation. There was punishment to every guilt and rewards to virtue and merit...."<sup>13</sup>



The rationale of state formation, as understood by the early Ahoms, was better expressed in another version of the myth. The Lord of Heaven was said to have told the founding fathers on the eve of their descent upon the earth as follows :

"The country is full of thieves and slaves. They cannot distinguish right from wrong. They are in the habit of taking others' property and wives by force. If a person commits a crime, do not kill him at once without fair trial... . There are people of various communities on the earth. It is very thickly populated. You must rule with a firm hand".<sup>14</sup>

These myths then suggest that the polity emerged in the protohistoric times as an agency for reconciling social contradictions, and it was believed to be divinely ordained.

These legends and myths hint at the superiority of the plough-using Tai agriculturists over their non-Tai neighbours who practised jhum (slash-and-burn). Their own ancestors, the Ahom chroniclers believed, were sent down from Heaven so that "large fields lying fallow" could be brought under the plough and stateless people, locked in constant warfares in the hills and plains, could be brought under a stable rule.<sup>15</sup> The Ahoms thus believed that they were divinely ordained, firstly, to extend their permanent wet rice culture to areas dominated by large-scale fallowing and shifting cultivation and, secondly, to absorb stateless shifting cultivators into a common polity with themselves. These two aspects of the Ahom thrust in Upper Assam determined, by and large, the course of the medieval state-formation process there.

"The Valley Shans", says E.R. Leach, "have everywhere, for centuries past been assimilating their hill neighbours". This is



observed not only in Upper Burma, but also in Upper Assam. There, the Ahoms assimilated some of their Naga, Moran and Barahi neighbours and later, also large sections of the Chutiya and Kachari tribes. This Ahomization process went on until the expanded Ahom society itself began to be Hinduised from the mid-16th century onwards. Non-Ahom tribes practising shifting cultivation were contemptuously described by the Ahoms as Khā people (meaning 'slave' or 'culturally inferior foreigner'). These non-Ahoms were, however, always free to adopt the latter's Tai culture, the very essence of which in the words of the German anthropologist Von Eickstedt, was "association with wet rice cultivation".<sup>16</sup> Besides, there is evidence in the chronicles that many Khā families were ceremonially adopted into various Ahom clans. The Ahoms were not endogamous. The liberal matrimony they practised outside the limits of their own respective exogamous clans helped the assimilation process. Instead of worshipping images, they made offerings to spirits (nats) and deities presiding over their households, rice-fields, forests and rivers. In major worships they sacrificed cows and buffaloes, and in minor ones fowl and pigs. Neighbouring non-Ahom tribes, too, apparently subscribed to almost similar animistic belief-systems. This fact also helped the Ahomization process. This Ahomization followed by Hinduization - the latter process involving a whole package of changes in the matter of language, mode of dwelling, food habits and agricultural techniques etc. - of ploughless autochthones was an important dimension of the state formation process under review.

Sukapha with his band of Ahom migrants entered Upper Assam in 1228 with a view to permanently settling there. For years the community went on moving from place to place as a self-governed body of armed peasants in search of a suitable site. In course of their journey they left behind some small colonies at strategic places like Khamjang and



Tipam. But after their temporary experimental stays at several sites, the main body finally settled by 1255 in the fertile Dikhou valley, now forming the Sibsagar district. Sukapha chose this tract primarily because he found the hill streams there extremely rich with silt.<sup>17</sup> Its proximity to the Naga Hills Range forming a natural rampart was another decisive factor. It facilitated not only defence and gravitational irrigation but also raids for slaves into those hills. Easy access to sites of salt-wells and iron ores was yet another advantage of the locality. The first Ahom capital was established on a low hillock, Charaideo. Though abandoned in 1797 for a new capital at Charga and later at Garhgaon in the mid-16th century, Charaideo remained a sacred place for the Ahoms till the end of their regime. The landscape there is still dotted with ruins of the tumuli in which deceased monarchs, their queens and important nobles used to be entombed.

#### IV

##### Marching Peasant Commune to Threshold of Statehood

The Tai-Ahoms on the march accepted Sukapha as their first king (1228-68). The choice fell on him not only for his qualities as a military leader, but also for his privileged birth in the Chao-pha (noble-celestial) or royal clan from which alone a Tai segmentary society could customarily choose its chief. More precisely, he belonged to the Tiger (Su/Tsu) clan of the Mao-Shan sub-tribe. His two chief counsellors, Burhagohain (Chao-Frongnung) and Bargaichain (Chao-Thaomung), were then chosen by him from the next two customarily important clans. Alongside of these three lineages, there were three corresponding lineages of magician-priests, namely, Bailung, Bodhai and Mohan. For purposes of matrimony, the Ahom orthodoxy was not reportedly permissive of matching the Chao-pha, Burhagohain and Bargaichain lineages with their



corresponding priestly lineages. Such extended exogamy rules - if our information is correct - suggest that there were originally only three specialized clans, combining both magico-religious and secular functions of leadership and that the priestly clans subsequently came into existence by way of fission, pre-dating their migration to Assam.

All these lineages together with four more - Dihingiya, Sandiqui, Lahan and Duara - constituted the Ahom nobility since Sukapha's times. Office was linked to lineage. Members of the relevant lineages alone could be admitted to the royal or other important offices reserved for them, subject to the approval of the chief counsellors. Normal succession followed the father-to-son principle, but the choice could fall on any other qualified lineage member as well. Thus, partly-hereditary and partly-elective, the King and his two chief counsellors together constituted the highest executive. They were supposed to hold each other in check and balance. Together they met from time to time in the King's audience chamber or the Big House (hawlong). Thus they managed a rude type of military democracy, in which the elders of other respectable and free commoner's lineages had also a voice. This simple constitution continued to be in existence well until the end of the 14th century. The chief counsellors elected a new king, and they themselves were in turn confirmed or newly nominated by the latter (obviously with support from the other nobles). Property rights in agricultural and waste lands were vested in the collective, i.e., the clans.

The King was thus initially a tribal chief. He shared leadership with his two great counsellors and, to a lesser extent, also with the heads of the four privileged lineages. Traditionally, they together represented the seven notable houses (sātghar). Though the King's



agricultural fields were worked by his servile dependants, his free subjects too were custom-bound to work voluntarily in rotation for him in recognition of his service to the people. His pile-house (chāng), a simple thatched structure of bamboo and timber and the hāw-long served as the focal point of the Ahom tribal polity. The hāw-long came to be known in Assamese as Bar-Ghar. While ordinary people lived in single-gabled pile-houses, the royal residence was in a closely built double-pilehouse. Hence, it had two gables and enough space to accommodate an audience chamber in one part of it. Later, a separate construction became necessary for the audience chamber. This is how the Hawlong emerged. This we guess from stray and vague references in the chronicles and the manner in which the Khamti chiefs were housed in the 19th century. When the representative heads of lineage groups assembled in the Hawlong (later also known as Bar-Chaura) to decide upon important social and political matters at royal summons from time to time, they constituted the Bar-Mel (Big Assembly). How the Ahom polity (mung) of the 13th-14th centuries functioned could, in fact, be largely reconstructed from what we know from 19th-century eye-witness accounts of the petty Tai polities of southeast Asia and of the micro-level authority structures in the <sup>village</sup> settlements of the Tai-Khamtis (cognates of Tai-Ahoms).<sup>18</sup>

In Tai language, the term 'mung' originally signified a chief's village or town (che) governing the surrounding countryside. The mung of the pre-13th century Tais was always a small polity comprised of villages alone. According to M.G. Quartich Wales, it was usually about thirty miles across. The early Tai way of life was mung-centred. The same term also stood for a whole kingdom, when several such chiefly domains were integrally linked under a king. The Ahom villages (ban) were each made up of a certain number of big and small extended families, living in long houses and belonging to different status-



differentiated lineage (foid) groups. Each such village had a territory that included wet rice fields, wastelands, forest tracts and house sites. Several such villages appear to have together formed a political structure, a chief's domain, with one of the villages serving as its central headquarters town (che).<sup>19</sup> At the apex of several such domains, that together constituted the mung (in the broader sense of the term), was the Chaopha, i.e., the King. This basic and rudimentary political structure hardly interacted with any Brahmanical influence during the said 13th-14th centuries. This influence began to be slowly absorbed and became substantial <sup>only</sup> by the mid-17th century.

In Sukapha's times and for some years even thereafter, all Ahom freemen were under the direct royal command. The community's small size and the exigencies of an unsettled situation demanded such a singular military leadership. However, there was a new arrangement from the 1280s onwards. The Ahom militia, then consisting of several units (Hatimur), was split on a stable basis into two divisions, one forming the jurisdiction of the Burhagohain and another of the Bargohain. These two counsellors were henceforth obliged, between them, to supply in turn the daily provisions and manpower the king needed. Of the non-Ahom subjects, a majority as before remained attached to the king.<sup>20</sup> Not all subjugated non-Ahoms, not even a majority of them, were reduced to slavery. Those who were not were nevertheless less free than the Ahom freemen, in so far as the former were subjected to a degree of coercion in the matter of service to the community at large.

All male members born in the three top lineages were known as Gohains; and those of the royal lineage among them, also as Konwars. By the term 'Sātghariā Ahom' was meant not necessarily just the seven respectable clans as variably listed in the chronicles, but an extended



circle. Because of a degree of social and spatial mobility as well as fissions, the number of Sātghariā lineage groups increased in due course to fifteen or so. It was from these groups that the high offices used to be filled in, on the basis of the tie-up of particular offices with particular lineage-groups. The conventional term, Sātghariā Ahom, and the notion that Assam was their joint conquest died hard. For instance, in an application to the British rulers in 1834, a scion of the Burhagchain clan said :

"The Buragohain, the Bargohain and the ministry and the seven nobles houses of the tribe of Ahom... possess as well hereditary rights in the soil, and are supported equally therefrom. The Rajah possesses an interest of two shares; the ministers one; and the rest of the nobility one".<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the government they together formed and continued to maintain was neither a monarchy nor an aristocracy per se, but a mixture of both, overlaid on a largely tribal social organization.

In those early days, the King-in-Council exercised in peace-time only limited authority over their Ahom subjects. This may be illustrated by an episode mentioned in a chronicle. Once the Bargohain's division of militiamen captured three elephants in a Kheda operation, of which two formed the royal share and one was given to the Bargohain. While the King's elephants were duly fed by the men attached to him, the maintenance of the Bargohain's elephant proved to be difficult as the Ahom militia could not be coerced into undertaking the fodder supply. In disgust, the Bargohain resigned. The man who stepped into his shoes had no such problem because his large household, with seven married sons, could boast of sufficient manpower for the purpose.<sup>22</sup> Obviously, this shows that at least until the end of the 13th century, even the

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highest nobles could hardly afford to maintain elephants on their personal accounts. Not many slaves were there as exclusive properties of individual households. Given the productive forces, large-scale slaveholding was not yet an economically worthwhile proposition. Besides, the Ahom militia was still basically an organ of voluntary collective efforts for defence, land reclamation and public works. It was not yet amenable to exploitation by the nobles in command for their private gains.

There were increasing social contradictions and tension over property rights in the late 14th century. This was evident even before the Ahom political organization was substantially separated from the social organization. Three interregnums (a-rājya), covering the periods 1364-69, 1376-80 and 1389-97, came in quick succession. This happened because of a lack of acceptable candidates for the throne following sudden deaths of its occupants. On one such occasion, the royal vacancy was filled in only after the king-elect and the nobles could be forced by the people to enter into a social contract. The king pledged never to become an oppressor like his predecessor and the people, in their turn, promised never again to raise a revolt. A symbolic tank was instantly dug up with spears; cows and pigs were killed (obviously for a community feast) and all those present dipped their hands in the tank to sanctify the oath-taking. This was indeed a ritualistic act of social solidarity in a Durkheimian sense.<sup>23</sup> | The last of the interregnums was preceded by a regicide in the year 1389. The assassinated king had been charged of interfering with the customary land distribution and of seizing women and properties for presentation to his favourites. The chronicles provide us also with the instance of an absconding Burhagohain's office remaining vacant for several years.<sup>24</sup> All these details of the socio-political reality suggest, on the one hand, that



the people could long manage without a king or an important noble because authority was widely diffused; and, on the other, that contradictions and tensions were also mounting by then within the embryonic Tai-Ahom polity.

We may now recapitulate. The organized body of the marching Tai peasants was indeed a miniature replica of the Tai polity (mung) it had left behind, even to the extent of being composed of several hierarchically balanced exogamous clans. The long wanderings until its territorialization in the Dikhou Valley around 1253 did not allow this polity to gather sufficient mass to pass into instant statehood. On the contrary, it might have even relapsed into more retarded conditions. We do not know if this happened, since conclusive evidence is lacking. At least for another century and a half, the public power within it remained apparently identical with the body of the armed Ahoms and inherent in their highly developed social organization. This we have tended to call a polity - a lower form of state - to distinguish it from State per se. It was inter alia vested with certain political functions, but had "no coercive power except public opinion",<sup>25</sup> over the free Ahoms who were armed. Only the subjugated non-Ahoms were coerced.

There was no further significant political development as long as the small community lacked a diversified economy. Here a contrast with the <sup>ancient</sup> Athenian situation may be permitted. Engels believed, on the basis of whatever limited data were available in his days, that the Athenian state-formation took place in a pure form "without the interference of violence, external or internal ... it represented the rise of a highly developed form of state, the democratic republic, emerging directly out of gentile society...". In the Ahom case, any potentiality of this kind of largely endogenous peaceful development is ruled out. Commodity production which, according to Engels, was at



the root of the anti-tribal revolution in Greece was <sup>/at a</sup> conspicuously insignificant level in the Ahom case. In Upper Assam, the initial course of evolution was therefore destined to be different. For a comparison (if at all), the Roman case as analyzed by Engels appears to be more relevant. The community of free Ahoms, as a whole, stood as an aristocracy in relation to the conquered tribesmen of Upper Assam, just as the original Roman clansmen emerged as patricians in relation to the conquered, the plebs, at the initial stage. Unlike in Greece and Rome, slavery however failed here to develop as a mode of production.<sup>26</sup> Slaves were productively engaged in agriculture here too, but not in large numbers. Here, several features of tribalism died hard, and the forces of production remained at a low level. What emerged from this situation was serfdom, and not slavery of the classical type. For, whether in agriculture or mining, production was still organized on a petty scale. Hence, the settling of slaves on a produce-sharing basis was found to be more convenient.

The Ahoms appear to have carried on their rice cultivation from the very outset on an individual household basis, with a large measure of mutual cooperation. Probably, there were also some community plots worked collectively by all as one found in 19th-century Khamti villages. In any case, the over-all land control remained vested in the clans. Since the King represented the totality of the clans, in due course this control passed into his hands. Tai mythology says that the founding fathers of the Tai rule on earth "made villages in a valley near a hill" and "divided the lands between their subjects and returned to the capital" (emphasis ours).<sup>27</sup> Historical data suggest that, during the Ahom rule, collectively reclaimed wet rice lands used to be divided into family-sized plots and distributed for usufruct among individual households. This distribution was made according to the number of



adult males in each such household and was subject to a redistribution after their deaths or superannuation. Any other category of land, when reclaimed by private efforts for permanent cultivation, and homestead land in general, remained obligation-free private property, subject to a degree of clan control.

The early Ahom society was thus a stratified one not only in terms of lineage status, but also to some extent in terms of access to resources. Certain families of high status constituted the nobility. The presence of one or several slaves in some such households and the division of society into high and low lineage groups - these as such were not enough to break up the 'gentile constitution' of the Ahoms. One could conceive of such a society not being fit to be called a class society or State, if one kept in mind the Chief-ruled Mizo and the Kebang-ruled Apatani societies, or for that matter, even some of the petty republican Khasi Siemships, as they were found at the time of their first contacts with the British. A Kinship-based power structure of the Tai model, rooted in the three-tier Ahom society, provided only the starting point for the more sophisticated state formation to follow.

The gentile constitution of the Ahoms faced a challenge only after conquered tribal populations were peasantized and Ahomized in great numbers at a certain stage and were brought within the militia fold. We have seen that the main body of the conquered subjects were initially attached to the King for protection and exploitation. As the number of such people went on increasing, the royal power vis-a-vis the generality of the Ahoms and the nobility, in particular, also went on increasing. There emerged a duality in the basis of the royal/oligarchic authority. The rule over subjugated people being "incompatible with the gentile order", coercion became its basis. But the habitual



obedience, the Ahoms rendered, continued to be based on their free will and respect for public opinion for many more years. The scale of operation was indeed crucial for a qualitative change in the social process. Until the end of the 14th century and largely for a century thereafter, both the Ahom territory and its population remained precariously small. We argue that the state formation per se therefore remained a far cry until then, because no adequate surplus could be realized from that tiny base. Because of this and for lack of a serious interaction with the more diversified economy of the old Aryanized settled population of the neighbourhood till then, "the gentile constitution could continue for many centuries in a changed territorial form", within the Ahom society.<sup>28</sup>

V

Emergence of the State : Its Sophistication

When exactly was the state then, in true sense of the term, born?

The regicide of 1389, the long interregnum that followed it and the revolts of the three subordinate Ahom chiefs of Mung Khamjang, Mung Aiton and Mung Tipam - all these events that took place towards the end of the 14th century were signs of growing social contradictions. In the reign of Sudangpha Bamuni Konwar (1397-1407), who was elected King at the age of 15, the revolts were suppressed, and the boundary between the Ahom and the Nara (Mogaung) territories along the Patkai Range was, for the first time, firmly delimited. A consolidation of political authority followed. A Brahmin of Habung, in whose house the King was born to a banished Queen and was brought up incognito, became his confidential adviser. This was the starting-point of the Brahmanical



impact on the Ahom polity. Habung was an ancient Brahmin settlement (Havrnga -Vishaya) situated near the mouth of the Dihing river. Sudangpha's choice of Chargua on the Dihing as his new capital, his setting-up of a Habung Brahmins' colony near his capital and his giving posts of importance to his Brahmin benefactor's sons on the frontier - all these were significant. He was instrumental for introducing several Hindu rites, alongside of the traditional Ahom ones, at royal ceremonies like the coronation.<sup>29</sup> With this Brahmin intrusion, the political authority remained no longer exactly identical with the armed Ahom populace in its totality or the tribal council representing it. There was a cleavage. This brought the highly developed social organization to the threshold of statehood. We still hesitate to call it a state per se. For it took a long time for the polity to totally subordinate the primordial clan loyalties to the overall public authority and thus qualify itself for full-fledged statehood. Yet by the end of the 14th century it was no longer a pristine polity, but something more than that - a state-like organization.

From the relevant scanty and conflicting details of an incident as documented in the chronicles, it appears that a dispute arose in 1493 between the chief (Khun) of a village of the Tai-Turung clan and the King over certain customary rights. Like the other Ahoms, the Tai-Turung people, too, used to periodically contribute their free labour towards the repair of the royal pile-house and work in his rice-fields. In this connection, once the Tai-Turung people were charged of a theft of grain from the royal granary and were heavily fined. This antagonized them. When they were called up again to repair the royal pile-house, the Tai-Turung chief and his clansmen used the opportunity to spear the king to death in his own house. For committing regicide, the said chief was later executed; and his clansmen and slaves were



ejected from their village and resettled in a different locality. The Burhagchain, suspected of complicity, was also dismissed by the deceased king's son and successor.<sup>30</sup>

A new phase of intensified Brahmanical influence started with the reign of Suhummung Dihingiya Raja (1497-1539). He annexed Habung in 1512, a Chutiya dependency until then. Thereafter, the whole of the Hinduized Chutiya Kingdom and parts of the present Nowgong district, then ruled severally by the bārā-bhūyāns and the Dimasa King, were gradually annexed to the Ahom kingdom. Since then resettled bārā-bhūyān chiefs and their relations began to be absorbed as scribes and warriors in the lower echelons of the growing state machinery.<sup>31</sup> By 1539, the Ahom territory became at least twice as big as what it was in size around 1407. More important, its Assamese-speaking Hindu subjects were now more numerous than the Ahoms themselves. This resulted in the availability of a wider range of artisan skills as well as a greater scope of division of labour within the kingdom. This expansion to new territories and populations, fully or partly Hinduized, had its impact. The King assumed the Hindu title of Swarga-narayana (god of heaven) and came to be addressed since then as Swarga-deva in Assamese. Suhummung introduced the Saka era in place of the old system of calculating dates by the sixty-year Jovian cycles. According to some chroniclers, he also started striking coins to mark the coronation. The hereditary nobles (Chao) were now allying themselves with the Brahmin literati with a view to forming an expanded ruling class. The Ahoms, themselves, being traditionally stratified into <sup>the</sup> high and low, there was no difficulty on their part to come to a compromise with and respect the rigidities of the Assamese caste society within their kingdom. State power was now, for the first time, also backed by fire-arms that had come into use in the wake of the Turko-Afghan invasion of Upper Assam in 1532.<sup>32</sup>



One dimension of the Hindu impact was the grafting of Hindu myths on Ahom legends with a view to identify all principal Tai-Ahom deities with gods of the Hindu pantheon, as for example, Lengdon with Indra. It is now impossible to say when this first happened. According to Gait, this might have been the result of the early exposure of the Tais to the Hindu colonizers in southeast Asia. However, the attempt in some chronicles at tracing the Ahom king's origins to Indra's intimate relations with a celestial woman (vidyadhari), in her human incarnation as a tribal woman, was surely a much later phenomenon. Instead of associating the Ahom royal lineage with Surya or Chandra Vamsha (Solar or Lunar dynasty) as was expected of them, the shrewd Brahmins accommodated the Ahom legends to the extent of describing it as Indra-Vamshij and this manipulation found its way into the chronicles. They also expanded the theory of divine origins to uphold the sacredness of the royal person. Any blemish or wound on it was henceforth viewed as a disqualification for his office.<sup>33</sup> This is how the Brahmins helped legitimize and validate the dynastic rule of the Ahoms in the eyes of their Hindu subjects.

Suhummung Dihingiya Raja made also a big departure from tradition by raising the number of his chief counsellors from two to three and giving the third and new counsellor the same Gohain status. This he did even in the face of stiff opposition from the other two. It appears that the novel designation of Barpatragohain was borrowed from the civil list of Habung where the local ruler, a dependant of the Chutiya King, had the title of Vrhat-Patra.<sup>34</sup> The third counsellor so appointed, being of dubious pedigree, was publicly claimed by the king to be his own half-brother, posthumously born to a banished queen in a Naga chief's house. The new lineage so created was therefore not to have any marriage relations with the royal clan. To rationalize this violation of the constitution, the king also presented a novel theory



of balance of power. "The kingship is the golden platter, the two Gohains constitute its two silver legs and a third one is needed" to balance it - this was how the king argued with his nobles.<sup>35</sup> As both the Burhagohain and Bargohain refused to part with portions of their respective Ahom militia units (hātimur) for transfer to the Barpatragohain, the king solved the problem by transferring his own non-Ahom militiamen to the latter and bringing a part of the aforesaid Ahom militia units directly under royal jurisdiction. In an attempt to appease the aggrieved Gohains, two new offices of frontier governors were created to be always exclusively held by members of their lineages. The King succeeded in tilting the constitutional balance in his favour, partly because of the long-felt need for an expanded administration; but largely also because his position had meanwhile been strengthened by a number of war victories.

Yet another important event of his reign was carrying out a state-wise census (piyal) of the adult male population in 1510. A survey of clans and crafts was also made to specify the nature of their respective militia duties. His involvement in frequent warfares and the need, accordingly, for a maximum mobilization of the paiks warranted this reform. The above census was the first one ever to be mentioned and dated in any chronicle. Hence it must have been an important water-shed in the development process and was surely a measure related to the rationalization of the corvee system. By the mid-16th century, the norm for corvee was that one-fourth of the adult males from every eligible household (ghar muri e powā) were to be always on public duty. Generally, three to four adult members were presumed to be there in a longhouse-dwelling extended family, and each in his turn contributed service for three to four months in the year. The Ahoms as well as the non-Ahom subjects, who were not reduced to slavery, were by then



[of the militia. It appears that the free-born members of ethnic Ahoms could not be easily coerced to undertake unpleasant work even as late as the mid-16th century. For, while describing a state-organized reclamation work, a chronicler lamented: "... some Ahoms complied with, some did not. Only the conquered subjects performed whatever work was given to them".<sup>36</sup> But this kind of resistance soon lost legitimacy and later was not heard of again. The polity had already grown into a full-fledged state by then.

### Early 17th-century Reforms<sup>37</sup>

As the scale of social, military and political action went on expanding, the militia could no longer remain what it originally was. The defeat at the hands of an invading Koch army in 1562 was an eye-opener. During the 17th century, the domains of Kamrup and Darrang and several petty chiefdoms of the hilly frontiers were wrested from the Mughals and their allies - the Koches. This expansion into the Lower Brahmaputra Valley and continuation of the hostilities with the Mughals till 1681 could not but lead to further sophistication of the Ahom State structure. From the reign of Susengpha Pratap Simha (1603-41), Ahom diplomats were almost totally replaced by Brahmins in the diplomatic missions sent abroad. This was done with a view to making diplomacy more efficient. The Ahom Kings also began to assume Hindu names in addition to their Tai patronymics. It was from the days of Pratap Simha, <sup>again,</sup> that they started patronizing Hindu temples with land grants. Their formal conversion to Hinduism did not however take place before 1648 and the new attachment became stable only towards the end of the century. Having struck its roots first in Lower Assam, the neo-Vaishnavite movement of Shankaradeva (1449-1568) became widespread later also in Upper Assam despite intermittent official persecution. It became an agency of gradual social change of the Ahoms and tribal peoples from animism to Hinduism; from pile-house dwelling to mud-plinth-house dwelling; from the practice of



burial of the dead to cremation; from languages Tai and tribal to Assamese; and, above all, in the case of the tribals, from slash-and-burn to permanent wet cultivation wherever it was yet to spread. Neo-vaishnavism was a simple religion with a universal appeal and sympathy for the socially despised. It taught people that all had equal access to God, and this without the mediation of Brahmin priests and expensive rituals. As a result, it attracted common people by thousands, particularly the low castes and trading elements. By the end of the 17th century, the mainstream of neo-Vaishnavism was no more viewed as a lower-caste challenge to the feudal social inequality by the authorities concerned. It began to receive state patronage and turn itself into an agency of collaboration. For, its cult of bhakti (devotion) and sharana (surrender) could be and was used to ramify the feudal culture. The Shakti cult was an ideal one for the rulers and the Bhakti cult for the ruled - such was the theory that gained ground within the ruling class. By 1714 the Ahom royal family was initiated to the former cult by a Bengali Brahmin hailing from Nadia on invitation. But at the same time, the neo-Vaishnavite monasteries were also increasingly favoured with large royal grants of rent-free lands and serfs on an unprecedented scale. The heads of all important Vaishnava monasteries were admitted to the royal court, and their presence in all royal ceremonies was institutionalized.

The early 17th century changes in the organization of the State stemmed from its sudden expansion into the erstwhile Koch and Mughal territories that had relatively a more advanced economy. In fact, the Ahom state structure received its final shape - the shape in which Talish and Wade found it many years later - only in Pratap Simha's reign. It was in his times that the two important offices of Barbarua and Barphukan were created. He saw to it that appointments to these



offices were exclusively made from the four respectable clans next in rank to those of the Gohains. With their inclusion, the number of Pātra-Mantriis rose to five. Yet another development was in the area of the concept of vassalage. Although the Ahom polity had started as a loose confederacy of several gunggs around a dominant one on the Tai model, it was not long tolerant of any hereditary vassals within its domain. But the new conquests of the 17th century necessitated the creation of vassal states. The non-Ahom Principlias of Darrang, Beltala, Dimarua, Luki, Gova etc. were retained in their respective territories on the basis of their agreeing to furnish fixed quotas of men for rendering whatever service was demanded of them. In the language of the chronicles, these feudal tenures were based on "Sthāpita-sanchita" (established and preserved) and "sevva-sevaka" (lord-vassal) relations. The expanded state was no longer merely an over-grown tribal system, although the kinship principle still considerably mattered. The institutions of Kingship and Pātra-Mantriis still retained their original clan tie-ups to the last. But many non-Ahoms were, at the same time, already admitted into offices at other levels, which were earlier meant exclusively for ethnic Ahoms. In some cases, they could hold such offices only after being fictitiously admitted into this or that Ahom clan for the purpose. Craftsmen, scribes and land surveyers had to be brought into the kingdom in large numbers from Mughal India by offering them due incentives. Need for sophistication warranted such changes.

The reforms of 1609 gave a final touch to the organization of the militia system. For the rota, the amorphous household remained no more the basic unit of paik supply, but was now replaced by an artificial unit, the got. It consisted of three to four militiamen, living close to one another.<sup>38</sup> Twenty such gots were placed under a headman - the Bora. How the whole reformed system worked has been briefly



described in Section II of this paper above. We may only add here that the militia became highly centralized. Even the lowest units, gots, could now be often transferred from their original khel to another. State paiks who could be permanently alienated to favoured persons, were now alienated <sup>/in large numbers</sup> even to temples and monasteries by way of royal grants. The functional and localitywise divisions (khel) of the militia were customarily of two categories - Kanri (archer) and Chamuā (distinct/respectable). The kanri paiks contributed services as ordinary soldiers and labourers. The Chamuā paiks, generally men of 'good' birth, were expected to render only non-manual services in accordance with their skills and status, or pay taxes in lieu of such services. They constituted the functional Khels. Commutation of service obligations for payments in kind or cash was allowed at the State's discretion to both Kanri and Chamuā paiks. In this respect, the similarity with post-1454 Thailand is striking. There each militia division, called lakh (like the Khel of Assam) and placed under a noble, was subdivided into two categories - (i) sway or those exempted from personal service on payment of a tax and (ii) prai or those called up in rotation to serve as soldiers and labourers. In return for his service, a Thai freeman could claim as much land as he could cultivate with family labour.<sup>39</sup>

In the Ahom Kingdom, one-third to one-fourth of all registered paiks were constantly in a state of mobilization, either for fighting or for constructive activities, subject to usual leakages due to truancy. Of those mobilized, nearly one-third, again, served their terms as servitors (likchau) of the nobles/officers in command. The latter were endowed with extra land during their tenures in the absence of a salary system. Grants of land <sup>/slaves</sup> and serfs were not limited to office-holding noblemen alone. Temples, monasteries and high-caste men of position too had their shares that constituted their private



properties. Already by the end of the 15th century, the Ahom political system was feudal in its essence both in political and economic senses. Through the reforms of the early 17th century, this feudalism was stabilized. Its roots could still be, however, traced back to Tai tribal institutions. The system was integrated by way of both lineage and lord-vassal ties, each often re-inforcing the other within the hierarchical bureaucratic set-up. The holders of wet rice lands owed their corvee service theoretically to the community. In practice, they rendered this service to the King and his office-holding village-level and state-level nobles, for purposes of common defence, public works and the maintenance of the public authority. Under the given conditions of a high land-man ratio, what was of prime importance to the system was not territory, but manpower. The larger the manpower, the greater were the prospects of collective self-defence and water control for the rice culture. Hence the significance of the adult male population census taken from time to time since 1910 and of the total absence of any land survey and measurement in the Ahom Kingdom until the end of the 16th century. This was also largely true of the Koch, Dimasa, Meithei and Jaintia tribal state formations of northeast India and of the Tai polities of south-east Asia.

Finally, a word about the territorial concept. The Ahom domain of Upper Assam came to be known to the Dimasa and other Bodo people as Hā - Sām (the land of the Shams or Shans) in their language. From this the terms 'Asam' and 'Ahom' were derived in due course, and the first term came to stand for the expanded Ahom Kingdom. Under the impact of the Indo-Aryan heritage of the region, the concept of 'Asam' was further extended to cover the entire area defined as 'Kamrupa' in the Kalika-Purana (c. 9th-10th centuries). The Ahom statesmen and chroniclers wishfully looked forward to the Karatoya as their natural



western frontier. They also looked upon themselves as the heirs of the glory that was ancient Kamarupa by right of conquest, and they long cherished infructuously their unfulfilled hopes of expanding up to that frontier.<sup>40</sup>

## VI

### Role of the Wet Rice Economy in the State-Formation

We may now discuss in some detail as to how, and to what extent, the Ahom wet rice culture was one of the major determinants of their political system in course of its evolution. In pre-Ahom Upper Assam, most of the rice cultivation was done by the ploughless tribal cultivators. Short-maturing dry (ahu) variety of rice, undulating/sloping land surface, broadcasting of seeds, slash and burn, land rotation for fallowing and the use of hoe or digging stick - these were its dominating features. A section of the Bodo-Kachari tribes, though still ploughless, had by then developed also their typical irrigation methods. They used to throw up a temporary bund across a hill stream in its upper reaches and draw river water along dug-out channels (dong) into their fields. But they had not yet adopted the technique of transplantation. Besides, their irrigated cultivation was still limited to an inferior ahu variety of rice and subject to frequent sifting, and, was in vogue only in the vicinity of the hill streams.<sup>41</sup> Wet rice-growing permanent non-tribal peasant settlements were all situated at a distance from the new habitat of the migrant Ahoms.

The Morans and Barahis - the people the Ahoms first came across and absorbed - as well as large sections of other Bodo people including the Dimasas were all shifting cultivators. Hence, there was no immediate scope for the Ahoms of extracting a mentionable surplus



from them. For instance, in Sukapha's times, the token tribute he received from these people consisted of shoulder-loads of fire-wood, brinjal, yam, edible tuber and roots, etc. There is no mention in the chronicles that their token tribute consisted also of rice. Forced labour that was exacted from them was largely utilized for domestic work and jungle clearance. The Morans, for example, were forced in Sukapha's times to clear the ground for three public rice farms for supply of provisions respectively to the Ahom deities, to the royal household and towards the community's ceremonial ancestral rites.<sup>42</sup>

The Morans and Borahis were initially looked upon as collective serfs of the Ahoms (somewhat like the helots of the Greek and Sbudras of Indo-Aryan society), a source of unpaid labour supply at call and beckon. Until they had picked up new skills like ploughing and the art of scraping land surface to a dead level or elephant-catching by way of Kheda operation - they were not of much use to the Ahoms. Hence initially, they were, by and large, left undisturbed in their forest dwellings. In due course, however, an ever-increasing section of them learnt these skills and were assimilated. Some of them were then turned into slaves and others into serfs attached to the estates of the Ahom nobility. A few of the tribal chiefs and headmen were admitted even into respectable Ahom clans. The rest were transformed into peasants doing militia duty like the Ahoms. What happened to the Morans and the Borahis also happened to other prisoners of war and conquered tribes.

Pre-Ahom Upper Assam was an undulating alluvial plain, full of jungles and marshes under the given conditions of a heavy rainfall. Land reclamation was therefore the first task. The Ahoms, with their superior iron implements and animal (buffalo) power, were equal to this task. Slope and water-control are the two most crucial factors



for wet rice culture. The Ahoms understood this very well. They uprooted the forests and reduced the undulating surface to a dead level so that the rain water, or water led from the bunded hill streams, could remain standing on it, when required. Over the centuries, they built and maintained a network of embankments for over-all water control.<sup>43</sup>

Since wet-rice fields had to be reclaimed and maintained by collective efforts of the community, this no less than the inter-ethnic clashes provided the rationale for a political organization of the mung type so far as the Tai-Ahoms were concerned. Dang Nghien Van however concludes otherwise in his study on the state formation process amongst the Tais of Vietnam. According to him, the hydraulic technology did not require centralized organizations as such for the distribution of water among the different population centres served by the same river in Vietnam. For this purpose, the village-level social organization, he thinks, was quite competent by itself. What led to the formation of the mung there was mainly, according to him, the inter-ethnic clashes.<sup>44</sup> In Upper Assam, however, the situation was different. People here had to manage the twin tasks of water distribution from several hill streams as well as flood control. The building and maintenance of embankments here remained a collective function on a wider scale. This function was almost as important as defence. Militiamen were obliged to serve the community/state for all such public purposes. For their service, they were allowed to cultivate communal wet-rice lands, free of taxes. This was the basis of the Ahom society, polity and economy.

Under the system, the mobilized militia units came to be abused at a certain stage of development, by the King and his officers for their private gains. These officers were recruited from the nobility. As a result, exploitation was there not only at the level of the



conquered tribesmen-turned-slaves and serfs, but it appeared also at the militia level. The traditional militia was turned into its opposite - an organ of aggrandizement and exploitation - to which every peasant was forced to contribute his service in rotation. One form of the exploitation, as already noted, was the utilization of a certain proportion of the called-up militiamen in the private farms of the King and his nobles as likchous (servitors).

The state, as it came into existence, took up the role of increasingly extracting the surplus labour for purposes of reallocation within the ruling class. The militia could be easily transformed into an oppressive organ, because of the heavy representation of <sup>the</sup> high-status lineage-groups in its leadership. The Ahom state was thus "a product of society at a certain stage of development", in the wake of "the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction within itself...".<sup>45</sup> Later, it continued to undergo further sophistication. It increasingly admitted non-Ahoms not only into the position of spiritual guides and preceptors, but also into the middle strata of the bureaucratic hierarchy. This happened under such compulsions as demographic influx, increased division of labour, demonstration effects of neighbouring states, Hinduization, the Mughal impact and, above all, the need for new allies to contain internal conflicts and establish social equation for that purpose between the rulers and the ruled.

Till about 1770 the Ahom political system, on the whole, worked. But thereafter, as peasant revolts under a religious garb became endemic and as the ruling class could no longer resolve the growing contradictions within itself and between the classes, it soon collapsed. It may be noted here that Assamese feudalism was caught



into this crisis even before its forces and relations of production had developed fully. Of the several socio-economic structures that coexisted side by side within the Assamese society, the feudal one was dominant. The feudal structure existed in the private landed estates of temporal and spiritual lords who had direct relations with their slaves and serfs without the mediation of the state. Then there were the numerous patriarchal peasant farms who were subordinated to the rule and exploitation of the aforesaid lords only through State mediation under the paik system. Finally, a tribal structure based on shifting cultivation also continued to persist side by side in certain pockets. Hence, the contradictions were complex in nature. Nevertheless, because of the dominant role of the feudal structure within and over the system, the mode of production was essentially feudal.

## VII

### A Summing-Up and Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, we have traced the political development of a segment of Tai population from the time they settled down in Upper Assam to the close of the 17th century. The original settlers, who soon came to be known as Ahoms, numbered nine hundred males according to one version of the extant chronicles and nine thousand, according to another. Though the chronicles do not mention so, we presume that many of them <sup>and</sup> were accompanied by their women as well <sup>that</sup> <sup>fresh</sup> <sup>migr-</sup> <sup>ants</sup> <sup>joined</sup> <sup>them</sup> <sup>from</sup> <sup>time</sup> <sup>to time.</sup> Otherwise, most of them would not have retained their original speech almost to the end of the 17th century. In their new habitat, the mung they organized was a replica of the parent polity they had left behind in Upper Burma, and the practice they started of maintaining a court chronicle also owed its origins there.



As the territorial and demographic jurisdiction of the mung went on expanding in scale, many socio-economic and political changes were also taking place. For an analysis of these changes, the whole period under review may be divided into two broad yet distinct phases. The years 1497-1539 - when the polity leaped into statehood - has been taken as the convenient watershed. Period I spans from the early 13th century to the close of the 15th, and Period II spans through the 16th and 17th centuries. In Period II the state underwent sophistication. Some overlap that remains in this periodization is unavoidable.

Period I saw no appreciable territorial expansion of the Ahom Kingdom. But, because of an assured and abundant food supply, there was a steady population increase by way of natural growth as well as selective adoption of local tribesmen into the Ahom clans. Over and above producing their own requirements, the Ahom villages also produced a small surplus for maintenance of their public functionaries. This surplus was created partly by a small number of slaves and serfs working on the farms of the nobility and partly by the numerous free peasantry contributing a part of their labour to the community for public purposes. Subjugated non-Ahom villages of shifting cultivators were peripheral to the Ahom economy and polity in this early period. For no worthwhile surplus could yet be extracted from them. The presence of nobles and commoners and of even a few slaves and serfs as well as a degree of literacy notwithstanding, the Ahom society was still by and large almost primitive, with only limited stratification in Period I. Division of labour or specialization did not go then much beyond one based on sex. Irrespective of status, every household generally combined spinning, weaving and one or more of other crafts with agriculture. There were in general no wholetime artisans and traders as such, nor were there occupational caste groups, except perhaps the liquor-brewers (madkharis).



Intra-local markets and pedlars helped peasants barter their marginal surpluses of this or that produce. There was no local coinage. The Ahom militia was still, by and large, a voluntary organization for common defence in Period I.

No doubt the early Ahoms developed some contacts for trade and other purposes with the Hindu caste society outside their own political frontiers as well. During 1397-1407, for instance, even a group of Brahmins were invited to come over, settle down and help in royal affairs. Nevertheless, for another hundred years or so, the Brahmanical influence at the royal court remained negligible, with little change beyond the superficial level in the traditional clan-based socio-political institutions. A significant change in the quality of the polity occurred, we have argued, only during the years 1497-1539. It was then that a sudden and big expansion, through conquests of new territory and population, ensured a much bigger surplus and warranted a major change in the constitution. By 1539 even the Hindus as such, not to speak of the non-Ahoms in general, apparently outnumbered the Ahoms within the Kingdom, then comprising the whole of Upper Assam. This warranted absorption of non-Ahom elements, such as the defeated Bhuyans, in the lower echelons of the militia command and administration. By this time, the Ahoms also had their first-ever confrontation with Turko-Afghan invaders from Bengal and they learnt the use of fire-arms from them. In a hot pursuit, the victorious Ahom force on that occasion even marched across the Koch country up to the bank of the Karotoya and came back.

These developments widened the horizon of the Ahom world. So long they had been in meaningful contact only with, and were transferring their wet rice technology to, less advanced tribes within too small a territory. In that process, they were Ahomizing the latter. But from



now onwards, i.e. in Period II, the combined population was itself exposed to a simultaneous Hinduization/Sanskritization process on a scale much bigger in geographical and social terms. There was not only interaction with Hindu castes and their ideologies within the expanded Kingdom, but also with the Koches of the neighbouring Kingdom where the same process had already struck roots. The Koch invasion of Upper Assam in the 1560s and intermittent wars during the next century with the Mughals and their Koch allies resulted finally in the annexation by 1682 of a major part of Lower Assam (including populous and relatively more advanced Kamrup) by the Ahoms. This expansion deepened and accelerated the forces of acculturation. There was <sup>since then a</sup> movement of peoples and ideas on a bigger scale than ever before. The reforms of the 17th century carried out by Pratap Simha and all subsequent reforms were a response to this new situation.

In his times and later, the Ahom policy was one of encouraging artisans, land surveyors and scribes from the rest of India to come over and settle in Assam. They were engaged to manufacture arms, to mint coins, to measure land, to make brick buildings and keep accounts of revenue collection. Under the Mughal impact, new crafts like the making of granulated sugar, tailoring, brass-working, making of rose perfume etc. were introduced. A rudimentary beginning was also made in money taxation and revenue settlement on the basis of land measurement and survey, while corvee continued still to be the major form of meeting obligations to the State. Locally minted coins were put into much wider circulation, although no appreciable development in trading organisation was yet visible.

One thing has to be noted in this context. Throughout our period and even later, the caste system in Assam remained lax, lacking



both elaboration and occupational rigidities. By the end of the 17th century, the Ahoms and several tribes were, by and large, admitted into the Hindu society as peasant castes of low status; but weaving and spinning, still with rare exceptions, continued to be combined with agriculture in their households. It was in fact universally so throughout Assam even within the caste society of older standing. The caste system was relatively more developed in Kamrup. Yet there, too, the Kalitas - a dominant peasant caste - allowed its members to form diverse occupational groups like wheel-using potters (Kumār), metal-workers (kamār/kanhār) and the like. The groups tended to become sub-castes, but no such fission ultimately followed on a stable basis. Even oil-pressing was done mostly in households, as professional oil-pressers were few. There was nevertheless a well-accepted caste hierarchy with the Brahmin, Daivajna and Kayastha castes at the top and a few untouchable castes at the bottom. In between, a whole range of intermediate castes, headed by the Kalitas was there with a varying degree of liberal practices regarding commensality and connubium. The members of the top castes were confirmed in their privileged positions by the Ahom regime. Many of them were endowed with land grants along with serfs and slaves and were given important positions in administration. Alongside of the Ahom nobles, they also belonged to the ruling class.<sup>46</sup>

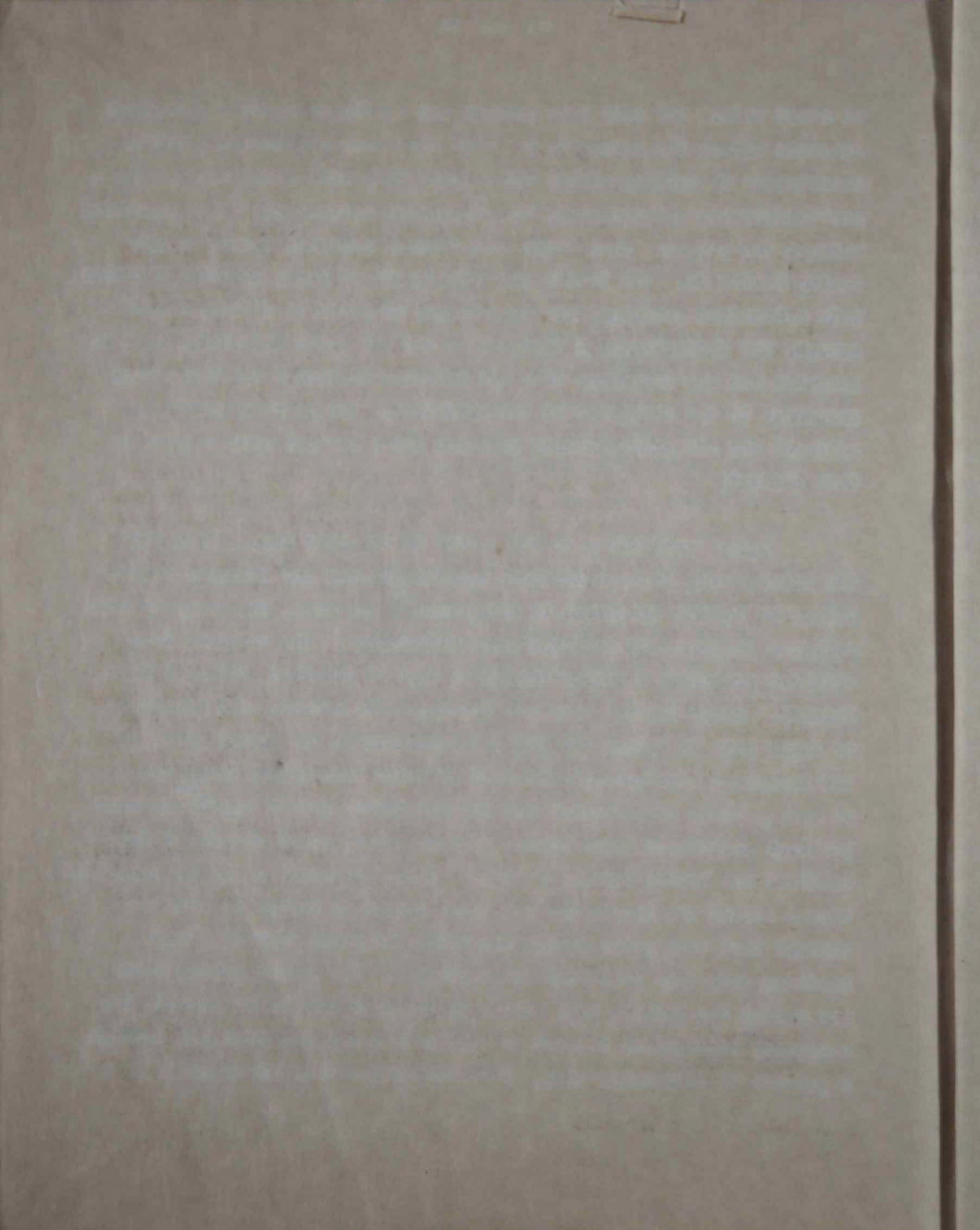
Monetization and trading activities, though increasing, still remained extremely insignificant both relatively to the total output of the Kingdom and by north-Indian standards. Yet petty traders and itinerant craftsmen, moving up and down the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, played a functional and necessary role in establishing bridges of communication between the diverse ethnic communities, as did the expanding Ahom State on the political-administrative plane. Several of the neo-Vaishnavite missionaries had a trading background



to start with. Not only that traders and craftsmen remained prominent elements within the movement, but they also used the neo-Vaishnavite monasteries as halting places while travelling with their wares. The neo-Vaishnavite missionaries, too, travelled extensively while preaching amongst the people. Thus there were several unifying forces at play during Period II. The fusion and development of local Assamese dialects into a standard language, its progressive adoption by diverse ethnic groups, the flowering of a humanist verse and prose literature in that language and the emergence of a new cohesive culture - all these were responses to the challenge of the situation. The neo-Vaishnavite movement and its proselytizing function had a crucial role to play in this context.

Space constraints do not permit us to probe deeper here into the relationship between Assamese neo-Vaishnavism and Assamese feudal State, as we have discussed it elsewhere.<sup>47</sup> However, the unifying role religion played needs a little more elaboration. The original Ahom settlers practised a magico-religious cult of ancestor worship and animism. Their deities were not symbolized by images. The hierarchy of their gods in Heaven was only a projection on the mental plane of the incipient lord-vassal relations of their semi-feudal primitive society. Their contemporary Bhuyans and tribal chiefs of <sup>the</sup> neighbouring polities patronized local mother goddess cults, mixed up with tantric-Buddhist and tribal fertility rites. This fragmentation in the religious sphere suited the fragmented political system of Period I. But the changes that took place during and after the years 1497-1539 were breaking down this political fragmentation. The feudal ruling class now needed the backing of a universal religion that could provide the necessary ideological support to unification and consolidation through a process of detribalization. Neo-Vaishnavism with its emphasis on a







## FOOTNOTES

1. Quote from L.H. Morgan, Ancient Society, Part II (London, 1877), Ch.2 cited in E.R. Leach, Political Systems of Highland Burma : a Study of Kachin Social Structure (London, reprint 1964), p.107n. We have largely drawn upon F. Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State (Moscow, 5th impr., n.d.) for our conceptual frame. We have also taken note of I. Andreyev, "Engels on the transition from primitive-communal society to classes and the state", Social Perspective, Vol.I, 1973, pp.3-28 and the stimulating discussion and observations in H.J.M. Claessen and P. Skalnik, ed., The Early State (Hague, 1978).
2. These chronicles (buranji), mostly anonymous, covered different periods of the Ahom rule and were periodically brought up to date. These have come down to us in their present form through a process of time-to-time copying. For a note on their historicity and for a specimen in English translation, see Tungkhungia Buranji or the History of Assam 1681-1806 A.D. (S.K. Bhuyan, ed. and trans., 2nd impr., Gauhati, 1968).
3. Amalendu Guha, "Land rights and social classes in medieval Assam", Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.3, Sept. 1966, pp.218-39 and "Tribalism to Feudalism in Assam : 1600-1750", Indian Historical Review, Vol.1, March 1974, pp.65-76; also by the same author, "Medieval Economy of Assam" in I. Habib and T. Raychaudhuri, ed., Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol.I : c.1200-c.1750 (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.478-505.
4. Relevant section from Fathiyya-i-ibryya by Shihabuddin Talish in translation in Jadunath Sarkar, "Assam and the Ahoms in 1660s A.D.", Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Vol.I, 1915, pp.179-95; J.P. Wade, comp., An Account of Assam, 1800 (B. Sharma, ed., Gauhati, 1972).
5. Talish, n.4, pp.179-95.
6. Wade, n.4, pp.i-xxix; Francis Hamilton Buchanan, An Account of Assam with some notices concerning the neighbouring territories : first compiled in 1807-14 (S.K. Bhuyan, ed., Gauhati, 1940), Chs.2 and 3.
7. Wade, n.4, pp.i-xxix.



the long run. In late 18th century, a non-conformist sect of the neo-Vaishnavites led protracted popular revolts against the State as a result of which its collapse was hastened. This suggests that the Ahom feudal state had already become <sup>by then</sup> decadent in every respect and devoid of any kind of legitimacy. Since our central theme is state formation, we need not go into the details of that phase here.<sup>48</sup>